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**“It’s a form of freedom”: the experiences of people with disabilities
within equestrian sport**

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Abstract

This paper explores the embodied, gendered experiences of disabled horse-riders. Drawing on data from five in-depth interviews with para-dressage riders, the ways in which their involvement in elite disability sport impacts upon their sense of identity and confidence are explored, as well as the considerable health and social benefits that this involvement brings. Social models of disability are employed and the shortcomings of such models, when applied to disability sport, are highlighted. The data presented here demonstrates the necessity of seeing disability sport as an embodied experience and acknowledging the importance of impairment to the experiences of disabled athletes. Living within an impaired body is also a gendered experience and the implications of this when applied to elite disability sport are considered.

Introduction

The benefits of horse-riding for people with physical and learning disabilities have been recognised since the nineteenth century, when riding was often recommended by the medical profession as a means to prevent and treat tuberculosis and neurological conditions (DePauw and Gavron, 1995). In 1965 the Advisory Council on Riding for the Disabled was established in Britain¹, becoming the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) in 1969. The RDA remains the key provider of riding and carriage driving for people with a range of physical and learning disabilities in Britain, offering opportunities for more than 25,000 adults and children to become involved with equestrian activities each year (RDA, 2009).

Para-dressage was first included on the Paralympic programme in 1996 and since this date the sport has been dominated by the British team, which won ten medals – including team gold – at the 2008 Games. This is in stark contrast to Britain's able-bodied dressage squad which has never

¹ Throughout this paper 'Britain' is used rather than 'UK', following the use of associated sports organisations which use the prefix 'British' rather than 'UK' e.g. British Dressage, British Paralympic Association

won an Olympic medal. This high level of success, coupled with organisational integration of para-dressage under the same umbrella organisation as able-bodied equestrian sport in Britain, gives para-dressage a relatively high profile and level of acceptance and visibility within British equestrian sport.

Para-sport has received little consideration from either disability scholars or sport and leisure studies researchers. The experiences of para-athletes are conspicuously absent from the literature in both these areas and this paper aims to begin to address this gap. Drawing on interview data with para-dressage riders, the varied experiences of disabled riders involved in elite disability sport are considered and the complex relationships between the realities of living within an impaired body and being involved in an activity which focuses explicitly on the abilities and capacities of that body are explored.

Definitions

In any discussion about disability, definitions are extremely important to understanding impairment and disability (Oliver, 1998). The ways in which we define these terms and the words we choose to use have important implications for how we see and understand disability. In British disability studies, the standard practice is to use the term ‘disabled people’, whereas in American disability studies the phrase ‘people with disabilities’ is favoured. The rationale for the American wording is that it is important to see the person first, and not to imagine that disability defines the person (DePauw and Gavron, 1995; Gordon and Rosenblum, 2001). But as Oliver (1990) argues, this does not resonate with the lived experiences of disabled people. It is nonsensical to talk about the person and the disability separately and we should accept disabled people for what they are – disabled people. Hence, throughout this paper the term ‘disabled people’ is used to signify and acknowledge the centrality of disability to the lives of people with physical impairments.

Context

This paper draws on in-depth interview data with five para-dressage riders, all of whom are actively involved in elite para-dressage in Britain. These riders may not be representative of disabled people more generally as, through their participation in elite disability sport, they are already demonstrating unusual ability. They also have access to financial, caring and emotional support unavailable to many disabled people. Yet these para-riders reveal the complexity of understanding the experience of disability which may, at times, be an empowering experience. The words of these para-riders are explored below, drawing on existing models of disability. The shortcomings of these models when applied to elite para-sport are considered.

In Britain, disability studies have been closely allied to disability politics. Two main approaches to disability can be discerned: the medical model, which sees disability as an individual problem which the disabled person must learn to cope with; and the social model, which moves attention away from the individual and onto the social and structural barriers that disable people with physical impairments (Tregaskis, 2004). The social model has been extremely influential in Britain and has been fundamental to establishing a strong disability movement and in identifying disabled people as an oppressed group. Arguing that it is not impairment that disables people but social and environmental barriers, the social model has been important in drawing attention to the externally-imposed obstacles experienced by physically disabled people (Oliver, 1990; 1996a). Undoubtedly, the social model has been extremely important in redefining disability as a social problem for which all of society must take some responsibility, and for inspiring a strong and proactive disability rights movement. But, as Shakespeare (2006) notes, the social model has failed to develop in recent years and does not take account of the different experiences of disabled people related to impairment, gender, race, class, sexuality and age. As such, the social model is open to the same criticisms as second wave feminism – in presenting the experiences of disabled people as a homogenous whole, a task which Oliver (2004) asserts is a political necessity, the experiences of some disabled people (e.g. disabled women, disabled people from ethnic minorities and people with learning difficulties) will not be taken into account. This has led to sustained criticism from many within disability studies that the social model is ahistorical

and essentialist (Thomas, 2004). Thus although the social model is crucial to any understanding of disability, it may not be adequate for grasping the experiences of elite disabled athletes for whom the specifics of impairment are significant, not least in terms of the classification system related to disability sport, and who may not consider themselves oppressed as a result of the many opportunities open to them through their sporting participation and achievements.

Gender can seriously affect the experience of impairment and disability, and this can be amplified in disability sport. Disabled masculinity would constitute one of R.W. Connell's (1995) subordinate masculinities as, through their physical impairments, disabled men are unable to live up to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity in terms of physical competence, strength and, potentially, appearance (DePauw, 1997). To conceptualise disabled masculinity as always and necessarily subordinate, however, is potentially discriminatory and is prioritising 'disabled' over 'masculinity'. Disabled men may find it more difficult than many able-bodied men to enact idealised masculinity, certainly in the physical and visual senses, but they are not necessarily excluded from it. Disabled men involved in elite disability sport challenge and upset commonly held associations between physical disability and weakness and ineffectiveness. As such, disabled men may be able to use their participation in elite sport as a way of gaining physical capital and aligning themselves with hegemonic expressions of masculinity, demonstrating the impossibility of viewing identity in terms of one dimension alone (i.e. in terms of just disability, or just gender) (Huang and Brittain, 2006).

The relationship between disability, sport and femininity is even more complex. In many ways, disability and femininity are not seen as problematic, as both are culturally associated with weakness and dependency (Morris, 1991). But the relationship between sport and femininity and sport and disability are seen as culturally questionable so the combination of the three becomes highly problematic. Unlike disabled men, disabled women may not gain physical capital through their involvement in elite sport, as involvement in an activity (sport) which itself has uneasy associations with femininity may exacerbate the difficult position of disabled women, whose femininity may already be questioned by our looks-obsessed society (Shakespeare, *et al.*, 1996). Women involved in disability sport can be seen to challenge cultural assumptions about both femininity and disability and thus have the potential to undermine such assumptions. But this

challenge is mounted at considerable risk to disabled women, who may be devalued both as women and as athletes.

The following sections consider some of the experiences, opinions, motivations and aspirations of five para-dressage riders. Names and identifying features have been changed to protect anonymity, although all participants would have been happy to be personally identified, indicative of the pride and self-assurance they feel in relation to their involvement in disability sport. The social model of disability is employed and the limitations of such an approach discussed in relation to its application to disability sport and a consideration of the embodied, gendered experiences of involvement in elite para-dressage.

Disability sport as a life-changing experience

Social theorists of disability have been highly critical of the ways in which traditional approaches to disability – known generally as the medical model – present disability as an individual problem that the disabled person must learn to deal with and adapt to by themselves, possibly with medical intervention. Oliver (1990) describes this as the ‘personal tragedy model’ as disabled people are seen as victims of terrible circumstance who must learn to cope with the misfortunes life has bestowed on them. The participants in the current study certainly would not relate to this view of their circumstances. As Natalie, 26, puts it

“I’d say it’s [her impairment] made an impact in a better way, in that I’ve had more opportunities, the fact that I’m a talented rider with a disability and I get to do something I love, when you think of people with no disability then you’re talking about a rich man’s game, isn’t it, I’ve been given loads of chances so it’s been a positive really”

Involvement in disability sport can open up a whole range of new possibilities and opportunities which are rarely available to people, able-bodied or disabled. Participants in this study spoke frequently of the way their introduction to disability sport had fundamentally changed their lives, their prospects and their own expectations of what they could achieve. Pete, 34, is the most severely disabled of the riders in this study and requires daily assistance with dressing and household tasks. Prior to his introduction to para-dressage in his early twenties, he had been “brainwashed” into believing that, as a disabled person, he would be restricted to a desk job, which he hated and which led to depression. After seeing para-dressage on television at the 1996 Paralympic Games Pete rang the RDA, the governing body for the sport at that time, and asked if he could get involved. This fundamentally changed his life which now involves frequent appearances in the media, travelling the world and numerous Paralympic medals. As Pete puts it,

“it’s really surreal ‘cos I love horses so much and I’ve managed to make a career out of it, and then to be successful at that career and for that career to take you round the world . . . to me I’m more successful than anyone I can imagine because for me it’s the respect and admiration from fellow human beings, it’s really nice”

The “respect and admiration from fellow human beings” that Pete speaks about can be related to social capital accrued through successful involvement in sport, an activity which is highly valued in Western societies. To be good at sport is often translated into capability in other areas of life and sport is a means through which economic and social capital is distributed (Messner and Sabo, 1990; Gregory, 2007). Disabled people are often perceived to be less capable and competent than able-bodied people and it can be difficult for disabled people to be taken seriously and not patronised in many social situations (van de Ven *et al.*, 2005). Successful involvement in sport may be a way for disabled people to demonstrate their capability and physical competence in a way that is easily understood by able-bodied society. Disability sport, especially when promoted positively by the media, may thus be a way of breaking down perceived links between disability, weakness and ineffectiveness.

The social model of disability as expounded by Michael Oliver, Vic Finkelstein and others aims to turn attention away from seeing disability as an individual problem and instead turns the

spotlight onto the ways in which social, environmental and structural barriers disable people and exclude them from full and active involvement in society. Although the participants in this study may experience such barriers in their everyday lives, none of them reported feeling such effects within disability sport. All of the para-riders compete successfully in able-bodied dressage as well as para-dressage, indicative of the relatively high level of integration of able-bodied and para-dressage in Britain. This is an unusual feature of the sport, and may be unique to the British context, and suggests that it is possible to achieve a greater level of integration between able-bodied and disability sport than exists currently. This could be an important tool for beginning to dismantle the binary definitions of able-bodied and disabled and may thus be a way to facilitate greater acceptance and integration of disabled people within society (Garland-Thomson, 2004).

Far from experiencing social and structural barriers, the participants in this study report the ways in which their involvement in disability sport has actually opened up new and exciting experiences for them. John, 22, was treated like “a mini-local celebrity” when he returned from the Paralympics,

“[people] kept giving me free stuff, it was really bizarre, and I’ve been asked to give loads of speeches and talks and I’ve opened two schools in the area and just really weird things like that . . . and it’s weird, to me I’m just John who rides horses and it’s really mad when people want me to do stuff”

Involvement in a socially valued activity – sport – can thus have positive effects for disabled people as well as able-bodied people. It should be remembered, however, that the participants in this study are elite disabled athletes and their sporting achievements and abilities are far beyond what most able-bodied people are capable of. This high level of success may be a prerequisite for disabled people to accrue the same benefits and social capital that are available to less sportingly-successful and capable able-bodied people, although more research would need to be carried out before this could be argued with any certainty.

Disability sport as an embodied experience

A key way in which the social model of disability may not be relevant to the experiences of elite disabled athletes is through its downplaying of issues of impairment and embodiment. The social model of disability developed from the groundbreaking statement from the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), '*Fundamental Principles of Disability*', published in 1976, and which provided a clear distinction between impairment – the loss of or damage to a limb or bodily function – and disability – the social exclusion and oppression placed on top of impairment (Oliver, 1990). This distinction remains an important feature of the social model of disability, and exponents of the social model have been keen to downplay the importance of impairment and the embodied experiences of disability in order to divert attention to the material and structural barriers that disable the lives of physically impaired people. Social model theorist Oliver (1996b: 41) went as far as stating “disability is wholly and exclusively social . . . disablement has nothing to do with the body”. This does not resonate with the experiences of para-riders in this research, as discussed further below, for whom the embodied experience of disability is central to their involvement in elite disability sport. Feminists have also criticised this stance. Jenny Morris (1991) argues that experiences of the body should have a place in disability studies and disability politics and that their exclusion is tantamount to a rejection of the value of personal experiences. Oliver (1996a: 38) responds to such criticism by arguing that the failure of the social model to deal adequately with the specifics of impairment is not a denial of the pain involved but a “pragmatic attempt to identify and address issues that can be changed through collective action rather than medical or other professional treatment”. But this fails to account for the real differences experienced by disabled people relating to their impairment, gender, class, race, age and sexuality. In failing to acknowledge and problematise difference, Oliver and other strict proponents of the social model are silencing the experiences and opinions of many disabled people.

Shakespeare (2006) suggests that a reason why disability rights activists and theorists may have been unwilling to look too closely at issues of impairment difference is the fear of reinforcing a hierarchy of disability, an implication that some disabled people are more worthy than others. But some forms of impairment *are* more limiting than others and some disabled people are very

restricted by their impairments, whilst others are not. Further, disabled people themselves may adopt a hierarchy of impairment, particularly in sporting contexts where the ‘ability’ of the disabled body is rendered visible and presented for examination. In disability sport a clear hierarchy of impairment can be observed, with wheelchair users and amputees – those disabled people who in many respects appear the most able-bodied in their movement – positioned above those with visual impairments and cerebral palsy – those disabled people whose bodily movements differ the most from the able-bodied norm (Maestro *et al.*, 1996; Deal, 2003; Howe, 2008). It is crucial, therefore, for any framework for understanding disability to include space for the experiences of impairment, including pain, illness and fear, as well as any positive embodied experiences. As Shakespeare (2006) notes, although disablism has many obvious similarities with other forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, there are also some important differences. Disabled people experience both the intrinsic limitations of impairment *and* the external forces of social discrimination. Even in the absence of all social barriers, having an impairment would still be problematic, unlike being black, being a woman, or being gay, because most impairments are in themselves difficult and limiting. To fail to include the experiences and differences of impairment in the social model is to fail to grasp the extent and range of disabled people’s experiences.

For athletes, involvement in elite disability sport is necessarily an embodied experience in which impairment plays an important role. Classification is probably the most contentious issue related to disability sport and this is, of course, centred on impairment and the capabilities and functioning of the disabled body. In para-dressage classification is done based on functional ability rather than specific impairment and there are five classification categories in para-dressage, each containing athletes with different impairments but similar levels of functional ability. This system of classification has caused controversy within the Paralympic movement. It is the method of classification preferred by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) (as opposed to the practice of classifying according to impairment), as it reduces the number of different competitions that need to be staged, which in turn makes Paralympic sport more attractive to the media, a key aim of the IPC. Swimming has embraced functional classification and in doing so has reduced the number of classes from 31 to 10 (Thomas and Smith, 2009). But critics of this system argue that it puts more severely impaired athletes at a disadvantage, possibly

even excluding them completely from the chance of competition (Howe and Jones, 2006). Some sports, including the flagship events of the Paralympics – athletics – have thus far resisted this system of classification. In para-dressage, the system of functional classification appears to have been embraced and to be considered a fair system. The respondents in this study viewed it as a time-consuming but necessary and essentially fair feature of disability sport. As Hargreaves (2000: 84) comments, moving away from classification systems based on impairment to those based instead on functionality is “an important symbol that the bodies of disabled people are being redefined as effective rather than defective”.

Involvement in elite disability sport is also an embodied experience in a much more personal way for individual athletes. Each athlete has a slightly different impairment, of differing degrees and which impacts on their sporting participation in different ways at different times.

In the current study Mark, 42, had been a moderately successful show jumper before developing multiple sclerosis (MS) about eight years ago and subsequently switching to para-dressage. As a previously able-bodied rider, Mark appeared to find the physical limitations and restrictions of his body much more difficult to accept and deal with than the other participants, all of whom had congenital disabilities. Mark says “I don’t consider myself disabled as such” and was very keen to stress that, although he now needs an afternoon nap as he suffers considerably from fatigue, “other than that I live a perfectly normal life”. He has even managed to wean himself off all medication and instead relies on his riding as a kind of physical therapy commenting, “it’s just the exercise really and I tell you I feel 20 times better than I ever did”. For Mark, his involvement in elite para-dressage is a way to regain some kind of control over his body which, with the onset of progressively-worsening MS, appears alien to him in many ways. Mark has a highly ambivalent relationship to his body and impairment, commenting that “I’m one of those weird kinds of people in that I’ve chosen not to go too far into my illness otherwise I’ll start thinking things are wrong with me all the time”. On the one hand he clearly feels some pride in weaning himself off medication which “was a bit like living in a fog”, but at the same time he is acutely aware of bodily sensations and changes in his functioning and capability. His ability to continue riding is of huge importance to his sense of identity and feeling of retaining some semblance of control over himself and his life. He comments “mentally [it helps] a *huge* amount, everyday I

get on my horses I think yes, we've made it through another 24 hours". To diminish the importance of impairment and the embodied experiences of disability in Mark's case would be to completely misunderstand his individual motivations, worries and concerns.

For Pete who, as mentioned above, has a relatively severe and unusual congenital disability, the embodied experiences of disability sport are different again. Pete sees riding as "a form of freedom" and says "I think I actually physically feel fitter and more supple after I've got on the horse, as long as I haven't had a hard session, and mentally as well . . . I do love that feeling of freedom and power and control". For Pete, para-dressage provides him with many pleasurable physical and emotional experiences that are crucial to his enjoyment of and dedication to the sport.

Involvement in disability sport needs to be understood as an embodied experience and the realities of impairment need to be acknowledged. Disability studies has paid very little attention to disability sport, despite the positive images of disability and empowerment such sport can provide. This may in part be due to the centrality of the body and impairment to disability sport, which is at odds with the focus of disability studies on structural and social barriers. Acknowledging the importance of impairment and the embodied experiences of disability, however, does not necessarily mean slipping back into a focus on disability as an individual problem, as Oliver (1996a) fears it will. Rather, acknowledging these features of disability in sport and other social situations can deepen able-bodied understanding of the experiences of disability, which remains an important task if we are to work towards greater acceptance and integration of disabled people within society.

Disability sport as a gendered experience

Awareness of living in an impaired body is a gendered experience. As discussed above, disabled men may find it difficult to align themselves with cultural expectations of masculinity whilst disabled women may feel isolated from hegemonic images of femininity. Following Mimi Schippers (2007; 2004), the social positions of individuals can be seen as 'man' and 'woman' and the characteristics believed to be the qualities of people occupying these positions as

‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. Masculinity and femininity can thus be understood as discursive constructs which are historically and socially specific and subject to challenge and change over time, so it is more accurate to speak of them in the plural form – masculinities and femininities. Within a given social context (in this case sport) and historical period (late modernity), specific forms of masculinity and femininity will be idealised (hegemonic) whilst others will be devalued and ostracised (subordinate or pariah) (Connell, 1995; Schippers, 2007).

Within modern sport, hegemonic forms of masculinity can be identified as strong, competitive, aggressive, and heterosexual whilst subordinate sporting masculinities are generally weak, ineffectual, compliant and potentially homosexual (Messner, 1992). Disabled athletes do not fit easily with either of these discursive forms of masculinity. In many ways, through successful sporting performance, elite disabled male athletes could be held up as exemplars of hegemonic masculinity yet their status as disabled men positions them as subordinate to hegemonic views of masculinity as physically strong and capable. Yet, as discussed above, success in elite disability sport may help male athletes to overcome these contradictions and to be granted cultural authorisation as ‘real’ men.

The associations between disabled men and successful sporting achievement may be perceived as less problematic than those between disabled women and successful sporting achievement as the active, competent attributes required to succeed in elite sport are incompatible with culturally accepted discourses of both disabled people and women. Corporate sponsors may thus be more willing to associate their products with disabled male athletes than with female disabled athletes. Male athletes generally receive more media attention than female athletes and this is amplified in terms of disability sport, where female disabled athletes receive much less coverage and exposure than their male peers (Thomas and Smith, 2009). Male disabled athletes are thus more attractive to sponsors and this helps exacerbate the unequal relations – in terms of participation rates, status and financial security – between male and female elite disabled athletes.

In the current study, this certainly appears to be the case for John who is reaping the rewards of his Paralympic success in terms of his “mini-local celebrity” status. In comparison to Natalie, who laments “I’m always sending letters, sponsorship is the most difficult thing to find”, John finds that “the majority of my sponsorship has just been offered to me, which is cool”. John’s status as a successful elite disabled male athlete may be a factor in the many offers of sponsorship he receives in comparison to the equally successful, but female, Natalie.

Equestrian sport, and dressage in particular, is an unusual sport in that there are a relatively high number of openly gay male riders. As Mark puts it, “dressage is full of queens!” This is in sharp contrast to most sports in which gay men are either excluded or silenced (Pronger, 1990). The widespread acceptance of gay male dressage riders has interesting implications for the formulation of hegemonic masculinity within this sporting milieu. In most sports, and particularly in the culturally central male team sports, homosexuality is not tolerated and homophobia is a persistent feature of most sporting social worlds (Wolf-Wendel *et al.*, 2001; Anderson, 2002). As a result, hegemonic sporting masculinity is usually stridently heterosexual whilst homosexuality is devalued, subordinated and ostracised. The acceptance and high visibility of gay men in dressage results in a slightly different configuration of hegemonic masculinity than that seen in most sports. In dressage, heterosexuality is not as central to the hegemonic ideal and homosexuality is not necessarily subordinated and devalued. Gay men are welcomed into this sporting milieu, particularly if they are successful riders, and are granted some cultural authorisation as ‘real’ men in this sporting context. Pete, in the current study, provides an interesting example. As a severely disabled gay man he would seem to have little in common with idealised sporting masculinity, yet his considerable sporting success may help him overcome these apparent contradictions. Pete notes that “I think my success has given me more confidence” and it is this confidence, coupled with his undeniable and considerable sporting skill and achievement which grants him access to the benefits of sporting hegemonic masculinity. In terms of both disability and sexuality, authorisation may be granted to men who deviate from the wider sporting hegemonic ideals but only when they demonstrate exceptional ability and success. This authorisation is thus always conditional on success – which itself is perhaps the most highly

valued attribute in modern sport – and so represents only limited acceptance of gay men and disabled men. Homosexuality and disability remain outside the hegemonic ideal but it is possible for such male athletes to be granted limited inclusion and acceptance, provided they can display exceptional ability.

Sporting hegemonic femininity is more problematic, due to the uneasy relationship between athleticism and idealised notions of femininity (Hargreaves, 1994). Hegemonic femininity (what Connell (1987) calls emphasised femininity) has received much less academic consideration than has hegemonic masculinity, particularly in relation to sport. Hegemonic femininity needs to be understood within the wider context of gender power relations which positions men and masculinity in a position of relative dominance over women and femininity. Hegemonic femininity, understood as a discursive construct, is the ideal for women that legitimates a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and so guarantees the perpetuation of current unequal gender relations (Schippers, 2004). Within sport, hegemonic femininity is powerfully articulated in the media, which grants much more exposure to female athletes who present a ‘heterosexy’ image than those whose gender performance sits less comfortably alongside idealised notions of femininity (Brooks, 2002; Stevenson, 2004). The symbolic exaltation of ‘heterosexy’ female athletes – the embodiment of hegemonic femininity within sport – marginalises other female athletes, limiting acceptable forms of sporting femininity.

Disabled female athletes do not relate easily to sporting hegemonic femininity with its focus on male-defined heterosexual attractiveness and bodily perfection. Although most women feel under enormous pressure to align themselves with often unachievable images of idealised femininity, this may be even more problematic for disabled women whose bodies are viewed as imperfect and inadequate in relation to the able-bodied ‘norm’ (Begum, 1992; Lloyd, 2001). The body beautiful plays a very visible and prominent role in popular culture and exacerbates the concerns disabled women may feel about being seen as feminine, as ‘real’ women. Disabled women are significantly under-represented in disability sport and this may be a consequence of the uneasy relationship between sport and femininity. Disabled women – who are often already perceived as

unfeminine in relation to hegemonic ideals – may be reluctant to become involved in an activity (sport) which may further alienate them from idealised images of acceptable femininity.

All women may be judged by their bodies and physical appearance but this is particularly true for disabled women. There is huge pressure to appear as able-bodied as they can and to disguise as much as possible the visible signs of their impairment and difference (Corbett, 1994; Hargreaves, 2000). Whilst disabled men may also feel pressure to minimise the appearance of their impairment, this is likely to be felt more acutely by disabled women who may feel particularly vulnerable in terms of their appearance and its perceived incompatibility with culturally idealised forms of hegemonic femininity (Begum, 1992). In the current study, Alice, 19, who describes the severity of her disability as “kind of middling”, is keen to stress the ways she is similar to the able bodied ‘norm’. She uses prosthetic limbs so “you don’t really know I haven’t got legs” and feels that “it’s [her appearance when riding] not really different I wouldn’t have thought, well no one’s said anything anyway!” Natalie relates with pride the fact that most people watching her ride “just don’t notice the disability” and that she attended a horse show for two years and the judge never noticed her impairment in all that time. Both of these young disabled women express pride in their ability to conceal their impairments, particularly when they are competing in an able-bodied environment, suggesting that they do feel under pressure to minimise their physical differences so that they relate more easily to acceptable notions of femininity and the idealised female form.

Conclusions

The experiences of the five para-dressage riders presented in this paper suggest that involvement in disability sport can have positive, even life-changing, effects for disabled people. Each participant reports how disability sport has transformed their expectations and opened up new and exciting opportunities, many of which are not available to most people, disabled and able-bodied. In this way, the social model of disability, which stresses structural, social and environmental barriers to the inclusion of disabled people in society, is inadequate for considering the varied and positive experiences involvement in disability sport can open up for

disabled people. The social model also fails to account properly for the embodied experiences of disability and the realities and differences of impairment, which again are important features in the lives of disabled athletes. These features should be included in future studies exploring disability, in addition to structural, social and environmental barriers, in order to ensure that the full range of experiences of disabled people – positive and negative, physical, structural and social – are given adequate consideration. This could then be used to expand the social model to include the realities of impairment and individual experience, whilst still retaining an emphasis on structural, social and environmental barriers that remain obstacles to achieving true integration between able-bodied and disabled people.

This study draws on a very small sample of elite disabled riders so conclusions drawn can in no way be generalised to disabled athletes or disabled people more generally. The study does suggest, however, that disability sport provides a prime site for further exploration of the embodied, gendered experiences of disability and may encourage further research in this area, which to date has largely been ignored or marginalised by both disability studies and sport and leisure studies.

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